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ABSTRACT

Allegations that a racially hostile environment existed at one high school led to a district-wide training session on cultural sensitivity. A model was developed to address the commitment to cultural sensitivity training. Objectives were identified to meet the goals established for the training sessions and activities were selected to address each objective. Feedback from the staff pointed to the fact that the model was largely effective in training professional staff in cross-cultural competence. Several recommendations are presented for those who have similar needs to provide training in cultural effectiveness. (JDM)

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by

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Chapter Twenty

Opening the Dialogue: *A Model for Districtwide Cross-Cultural Effectiveness Training*

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In the spring of 1998, a parent in the Northside Independent School District (Northside ISD) filed a complaint with the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) alleging that a racially hostile environment existed within the district. The allegation was based on a particular student-student interaction at one of the district's six comprehensive high schools. The complaint alleged that the district failed to provide a climate that minimized such problems and failed to address the problem once it occurred. Though the district did not agree with various aspects of the complaint, it did voluntarily agree to address the allegations. One of the voluntary actions was to "provide mandatory in-service on cultural sensitivity for administrators and teachers by September 30, 1998, and teachers will reinforce concepts related to cultural diversity, as appropriate, throughout the 1998–99 school year" (Henderson & Zambrano, 1998). This event set the stage for the planning of a districtwide training session.

Concern regarding racial and ethnic insensitivity had been expressed prior this precipitating event. During the previous school year (1997–98), Dr. Patricia Henderson, director of guidance for Northside ISD, reported hearing concerns among members of the counseling staff about racial and ethnic insensitivity on the various campuses. As a result, a training model for the district's campus counselors had been developed during that school year, and all elementary, middle, and high school counselors had participated in a daylong training regarding cultural issues. The training session developed for the district counseling staff provided the framework for a trainer of trainers model to be used for training the district's 1,900 professional employees.

The mission statement of the Northside ISD Strategic Plan for 1998–2003 espouses an appreciation for cultural diversity and the importance of building "challenging learning environments . . . in a climate of cooperation and mutual respect" (Northside ISD, 1998). Furthermore, the following are drawn from the statement of beliefs in the district strategic plan:

- The well-being and education of children are vital to the future of our society.
- The quality of our schools directly affects the quality of our community
- Each individual has worth and deserves respect.
- The diversity of our cultural heritage enriches life.

The district strategic plan was laced with these and other statements that clearly signaled the importance the district placed on cultural diversity. The strategic plan was developed by a mixed group of individuals representing the school, the home, local businesses, and the community at large. Whereas OCR provided the legal mandate for the training, the strategic plan clearly provided the philosophical authority to prepare a districtwide training model.

Developing the Model

District Superintendent Ed Rawlinson asked Patricia Henderson, director of guidance, and Elias Zambrano, coordinator for the district Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities Program, to lead in the development of a model that would address the commitment to cultural sensitivity training by the deadline specified in the agreement with OCR. To address this task, we turned our attention to the model that had been used with the school counselors in the previous year. The reception of the training had been positive among the district counseling staff. The training had addressed cultural sensitivity, as was required in the agreement with OCR, and it further provided district counselors with an opportunity to develop plans for enhancing their own cultural competencies and for addressing culturally sensitive school climates.

The training to be developed would be addressed to teachers, campus- and district-level administrators, counselors, psychologists, and other support personnel. Therefore, in beginning the development of the model, we referred to *Cultural Diversity: An Inservice Awareness Program for Educators,* a training model developed by the American School Counselors Association (ASCA) that had served as the framework for the training provided to the district counselors (Jung, Price, Schanberg, Sheldon, Wilson, & Zambrano, 1987). The ASCA training model was developed by a team of six school counselors representing different geographic areas of the United States, and the elementary, middle, and high school levels. It was designed for presentation by school counselors to

mixed groups of teachers, administrators, and others who worked on the school campus. It therefore provided a reference point in the development of the needed model for the school district.

In reviewing the ASCA model, we believed some of the ideas and activities were germane to our district training needs. However, we needed a new plan that more fully addressed strategies for building school- and district-level climates that were culturally sensitive and friendly. The plan also needed to provide Northside ISD staff with knowledge and skills for cross-cultural effectiveness. We entitled the session "Becoming Culturally Competent Educators: Works-in-Progress" (Henderson & Zambrano, 1998), because we believed that this daylong training was to be the genesis for the continued growth and attention needed to create conditions that would support culturally friendly and sensitive climates across the district. Goals and objectives were crafted to meet the provisions of the agreement with OCR and to provide Northside ISD staff with quality training in cross-cultural effectiveness. The following goals were developed to increase cultural competence:

- to be aware of one's own cultural-based assumptions, values, and biases;
- to understand the worldview of students who are culturally different from oneself; and
- to use effective instructional practices, intervention strategies, and techniques (Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis, 1992).

The objectives developed to realize these goals will be described later in the text.

As previously stated, the model we developed was intended to train 1,900 professional staff members. We readily determined that if the training were to be completed by the appointed date, a trainer of trainers model would have to be used. The district lacked the physical plant to house 1,900 people in any one location at any one time, and it would be difficult to find enough days to release campus personnel from their duties to provide the training to all those expected to attend. Besides, it was our intent that the model would afford participants an opportunity to learn in environments that encouraged participation and risk taking.

We also agreed that the training model had to be both experiential and didactic in presentation, because including both styles of presentation would respect the various styles of learning present in any large-group setting (Morris and McCarthy, 1995). We intended to provide participants with information that could challenge them to stretch intellectually with regard to cross-cultural effectiveness and also give them time to practice the information presented.

Finally, we agreed that the design had to provide participants with the perception of a high degree of safety, as it was clear that there would be resistance given that the training was mandatory for all campus and district personnel. In

order to address this and the other parameters we identified, we agreed that each campus would identify a training team of at least two people to be sent to a training session. We recommended that an administrator be a member of the training team to give the project the campus support it needed. We also recommended that a counselor be a member of the training team to lend the support of expertise in human relationships. The 82 campus teams, one team from every campus, would receive the training. Then, in collaboration with the campus administration, they would be charged with training their respective campus colleagues.

Activities and Objectives

As mentioned previously, objectives were identified to meet the goals established for this training session. We then selected or created activities to address each objective in learning environments that were sensitive to various learning styles, enjoyable, perceived to be safe, and provided opportunities for participants to stretch their professional competencies regarding cross-cultural effectiveness. Each objective was addressed by two activities: The first introducing the concept being addressed, and the second providing a deeper understanding or experience. Following is a description, by objective, of the training model that was developed and that was eventually presented to the 1,900 professional staff members of Northside ISD.

Objective 1: Examining Beliefs and Feelings about Different Cultures

Activity 1: Organized in small groups, participants were provided a structured opportunity for a cursory examination of their personal values about others and the impact they wish to make on others.

Activity 2: Participants were asked to reveal more about their beliefs regarding race by individually completing a cultural awareness inventory. This instrument provided a means for safely discussing similar and differing ideas about race and ethnicity among members of a small group.

Objective II: Developing Awareness of How Personal History Affects Cultural Attitudes

Activity 3: Continuing in small groups, participants were asked to use their names as a means of exploring their family's racial or ethnic heritage and family or community experiences tied to their name. Participants began to associate more closely and express personal experiences and issues of race and ethnicity in this activity.

Activity 4: Participants moved away from their small (and relatively safe) group

in this activity and formed a new group with others who shared a common racial or ethnic identity. Groups were asked to discuss the beliefs they held about other racial or ethnic groups, and the beliefs they perceived other groups held about them, including racial slurs, stereotypes, etc. Groups were encouraged to share their findings with the larger groups to identify similarities and differences in experiences among the various racial and ethnic groups represented.

Objective III: Applying Theory to Practice in Defining Culturally Competent Educators

Activity 5: Again in small groups, participants were asked to use art media to brainstorm characteristics that identify a culturally competent educator. Time for sharing among the various small groups was provided.

Activity 6: Through the use of a handout, participants discussed professional competencies and standards that would describe a culturally competent educator.

Objective IV: Generating Specific Plans for Fostering Climates of Mutual Respect in Our Schools

Activity 7: Remaining in small groups, participants were led through a structured exercise that challenged them to identify and discuss the nature of cultural insensitivity found in their school or district environment. Time was again provided for small groups to share their findings with the larger group.

Activity 8: Remaining in their small groups, participants were asked to identify one culturally related problem in their work environment that was challenging yet within their locus of control. Each group was asked to brainstorm possible solutions for resolving that area of cultural concern.

Objective V: Leaving Better Prepared to Act from a Culturally Sensitive Base

Activity 9: Continuing in their small groups, participants were asked to use the power of visualization to synthesize all that they had learned, experienced, and discovered in the course of the day. They were asked to create a logo that represented the culturally friendly climate they would commit to building upon returning to their school or district office. Time for sharing among the groups was again provided as closure for this activity.

Activity 10: Participants were asked to reconsider the first activity and the values they had espoused regarding others. Given the day's activities, they were provided time to add to their ideas and initial thoughts. A call to make one commitment either to improve themselves or to make their environment more culturally sensitive ended the day's experience.

Schools chose various times to present the training. Some schools chose to divide the presentation of the training by objectives, holding two three-hour sessions after the school day. Others held the training on a Saturday and provided the staff with compensatory time later in the school year. As the training sessions were held across the district, we began to receive feedback, and we learned the following positive features of the training model:

- Concern for the level of racial and ethnic insensitivity was found on all campuses, regardless of demographics.
- Using the small-group structure for most of the experiential activities provided a safe environment for participants to share their experiences and learn from each other.
- The sharing of experiences and concerns in the group sessions provided a safe invitation for those most resistant to participate.
- People, regardless of their racial or ethnic heritage, were eager to tell their stories.
- School training teams appreciated having a model to present that was easy to duplicate, activity oriented, and prepared so that all materials were ready for duplication.
- Support from the superintendent down the chain of command added to the success of the training.

Limitations of the Training Model

Given the feedback we received, the model apparently was largely effective in training Northside professional staff in cross-cultural competencies. However, there were problems encountered along the way. During the initial planning of the training model, *key* district personnel expressed uneasiness over the experiential nature of the training being recommended and the time that was being requested. They seemed concerned that opening dialogue across the district about racial and ethnic issues would result in opening a Pandora's box that district and campus leaders might not be able to contain or have the resources to respond to. Dialogue about the need to learn and experience (as opposed to having a lecture session), and about the sense of safety built into the plan was necessary to gain approval for the plan as presented.

Another limitation of the training model is that it was not part of a larger plan to continue training and support activities over time. Because it was a stand-alone activity, most campuses did not provide additional time for more training or follow-up after the session was completed. Additionally, no one person or department was charged with monitoring campus and district activities after the period for campus training was completed. As a result, all new staff

members who have been employed by the school district since the summer of 1998 have not had similar training and, sad to say, racial and ethnic incidents have continued to happen that have had a profound effect on the life of various campuses and the district itself.

From these limitations it is clear there is continued uneasiness about discussing the multicultural nature of society in the United States. Without the legal pressure that precipitated the development of this session, much dialogue that took place in 82 campuses across the district never would have happened. Participants would have lost the spectrum of experiences, the beauty found in the plethora of traditions grounded in cultural heritage, and the celebration of endurance and resilience that was demonstrated over and again as individuals shared their stories.

We also learned that creating school and district environments that are culturally sensitive and friendly requires a commitment of people, time, and resources over an extended period. Changing any environment requires time to think about the changes needed, to articulate what is needed and why, and to practice the set of behaviors that will support the desired change.

Involvement of People in a People Problem

"Becoming Culturally Competent Educators: Works-in-Progress" was presented to 1,900 professional employees of the Northside ISD, and the one primary factor in its success was the commitment of the trainers to take the training back to their campuses. The decision to take training out of the hands of recognized experts in the field of human relations and instead to arm campus members with the skills and materials necessary to lead the training provided a high level of participation and trust among campus staff members. Schools selected who would lead their training session by sending teams to the trainer of trainers sessions. Very often, the training teams consisted of administrators and counselors. Each team representing a campus had a better understanding of the cultural issues present on their campus than any outside trainer could have had. In most cases, trust was already in place, or at least was easier to build, between these individuals and campus staff. Furthermore, we suggested that the training teams engage more individuals on their campuses to assist with the training, thereby increasing the number of people who had ownership in the session. Individuals were enlisted to assist with materials preparation, to arrange food and facilities, and to facilitate small-group activities and discussion. Enlarging the circle of campus staff participants also extended the network of people committed to a successful training session.

The incident that was the impetus for the development of "Becoming Culturally Competent Educators: Works-in-Progress" is not unique to Northside ISD. Incidents of cultural insensitivity are found in all schools in all communities. In closing, I offer the following recommendations for those who have similar needs and concerns to provide training in cultural effectiveness.

1. Get support from those in the organizational hierarchy who have similar needs or concerns. Though doing so is not essential for success, it provides a level of legitimacy that facilitates the delivery of such training and increases the level of participation.
2. Begin small if you are meeting resistance. It is more important to begin than to begin with a big bang. Begin with a class, a team of teachers, a team of support staff, or a parent group. A successful experience with any one group will only increase the impetus for more work in the area of cultural effectiveness.
3. Develop a plan for ongoing training and activities over time. People and institutions change their beliefs and values slowly. Have a plan for how each training session will support the previous one, and for the kind of strategies that will sustain the synergy and change created. Also designate who will be accountable for ensuring that activities are completed.
4. In planning your training, work on the climate first. The greater participants' sense of safety and enjoyment, the more risks they will take with you—and each other!
5. Move slowly in inviting participants to work on issues of racial and ethnic insensitivity. Like everything else, their level of comfort with issues of race is developmental and reflects where they are with their own racial identity (Helms, 1995).
6. Move from activity to higher order concepts. Activities allow participants to safely experience the very issues you may wish them to discuss. The experience gives them a framework for discussing topics that may otherwise create defensiveness or may seem too frightening given each individual's background.
7. Have participants develop a plan. Doing so gives them something concrete to leave with and a point from which to begin their work in their own setting. If there is a system for mutual support, encouragement, and accountability, the plan is more likely to work.

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